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The ritual of Voodoo and the symbolism of the body

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Voodoo occurs in Haiti. The population of this Caribbean island is mainly negro, having been brought over from Africa as slaves to work in the plantations for the French; but the slaves rebelled at the time of the French Revolution, and gained their independence in 1804.

The negroes brought a number of things with them from Africa. Amongst these were several tribal cults, which over the years became amalgamated and developed into what is now called Voodoo. This is basically a familial ancestral cult held in place, as it were, by a large pantheon of gods. In Haiti, private ceremonies are held from time to time to invoke the ancestral spirits and gain their protection; while public ceremonies are held weekly in the various temples, when the gods of the pantheon are summoned. Prayers and songs open these weekly ceremonies, followed by singing and dancing to complicated drum-rhythms. The gods then possess their servitors, and are said to ride them as men ride horses.

Though everyone, of course, has ancestors, not everyone in Haiti serves his ancestral spirits. To become a servitor a man or woman needs to be initiated. The urge to be initiated comes sometimes from a man's parents, more usually from a series of inner promptings. For instance, the gods can appear in dreams, demanding to be served; often also the spirit of a dead parent or grandparent may appear, complaining that he has sojourned long enough in the waters of death and asking to be ceremonially drawn up and placed in certain jars, which are then deposited on the family altar. There, the spirit can be made to speak by the intervention of a Voodoo priest or priestess, and to give oracles. But the promptings may take more concrete forms; a man's business may fail, his livestock die, he or his family fall ill: and if he still ignores such warnings, he may collapse and go mad.

Mental crises are as common in Haiti as elsewhere, and they are not all regarded as springing from the querulous demands of gods or ancestors. Most of them in fact come from the unrealistic demands of parents upon their children. Haitian fathers are often harsh, severe and uncompromising, both towards their wives and their children, demanding standards of behaviour they themselves may never keep; and mothers, though soft-hearted, support the paternalistic régime, and terrify their children into good behaviour by telling them ghoulish stories about zombies, witches, devils, and all the other monsters of the Haitian supernatural. It is in fact openly held that children will only be well-behaved if they have been properly terrified.

Supernatural fears are thus instilled early into children, as are unrealistic social and moral standards. Young people of both sexes often have nervous breakdowns, sometimes trivial, sometimes severe, caused by fear, or suspicions of black magic in others, or stifled rage: the Haitian theory of such breakdowns being that they are caused by a rush of bad blood to the head, usually known as 'une saisissement', a seizure.

The logic of this is based in turn on the Haitian theory of the composition of the human person. It is seen as a trinity: first there is the soul, known as the big good angel, which is associated with the breath; second is the little good angel, which is cold by nature and associated with water; third is the 'corps-cadavre', the corpse body of carcass. All emotions and all forms of magic act upon the soul, which is easily displaced: the blood then rushes into the head, heating and infecting the spirit, and the net effect is to turn a person into a kind of zombi. People can indeed be turned into zombies by magical means, by driving a cemetery spirit into their bodies, or magically filching their souls away—the cemetery god, the famous Baron Samedi, being the king of zombies, and the patron of love, black magic and healing. The spirit or little good angel interestingly enough may also be called a zombi, and its nature is similar to that of the gods. The threefold character of the person may best be seen at work in Voodoo, when the soul is in fact displaced so that the gods can possess the body, and make a zombi of it.

A person suffering from a mental crisis of *saisissement* may be ritually cured by washing his head in water, in which a number of different leaves have been crushed. In others, the crisis develops more subtly, and can turn the sufferer into a witch or vampire, who is thought to fly about at night emitting a fiery trail, and to suck children's blood. In such cases, and where the head-washing rite has not been successful, a fairly severe fugue may develop which can last for days or weeks. Such fugues are usually brought on by quarrels of various kinds, coloured by the suspicion of having been bewitched or poisoned; and they are resolved by the sudden appearance of a god in a vision, who tells the sufferer of a ritual means of cure, and teaches him the secret by which he can go into trance in the future. Sometimes, too, the sufferer vomits up a number of leaves, or small lizards, or a large centipede, the sign of the illness, the quarrel and the suspicion, as well as of the god's saving action. On recovery, such a person sets himself up in an oracular shrine and is possessed by the god who thus constellated his illness, advising others on matters of magic and sickness, and using the leaves, the lizards or the centipede as a universal medicine. He has in fact at once internalized the psychological aspect of his illness as a god, and externalized it as a medicine.

The same pattern may be seen in rites of initiation into Voodoo. The songs and prayers make it plain that the novices are being exposed to a great illness on the ritual level, a kind of mock death which identifies them consciously with another cemetery spirit, also an erotic one, called Guédé. During their initiation they go into a seclusion nine days long, learning secret pass-words, songs, prayers and ritual acts; their heads are then washed, just as though they were suffering from a *saisissement*, they are then encouraged to be possessed by their patron gods, are purified by fire, and finally are baptised with a new name. The priest in charge then invokes their ancestral spirits and places them in jars, which they later have in their own charge. Here too a simultaneous internalization and externalization of psychological matters takes place.

The evidence thus shows that a man is initiated after promptings by the gods on the same lines as one who is successfully coping with a secular neurosis, though the ritual resolution of this spiritual ailment is more highly elaborated. Voodoo and mental illness are in fact based on the same phenomenon, that of dissociation: acted out secularly in the theatre of the family and the responsibilities of daily life, ritually in the theatre of the

Voodoo temple. In the temple everything is aimed at making the gods appear: first quite formally, by prayers; later aesthetically and actively, by singing, dancing and drumming. Drummers in fact observe the dancers carefully, and hasten possession in those they judge ripe for it by altering or breaking the rhythm. The dancer then staggers blindly around the dancing floor, feeling a great weight on his neck and in his legs, and finally loses consciousness as the god who is being invoked takes possession of him. The god then acts out his divine nature in the traditional manner, showing a quite definite character in his movements and in his expression, which is like that of a mask. Every god has a different habit.

The symbols and rituals used to bring about this state of affairs are of great interest. The novice must lie on his left side during seclusion, this traditionally being his introverted, unmanifested, feminine or dark side; after his head has been washed, a candle is stubbed out on the nape of his neck, to seat his soul firmly in its proper place; and, during the initiation of a priest, certain acts are performed which assimilate the novice to the images of a tree and of a snake. Songs speak of the old fig-tree, haunt of evil spirits, as falling, and goats eating its leaves; and of other leaves, under the care of snakes, which are full of virtue and do good magic.

The image of the old tree falling finds its analogy in the fact of dissociation, during which a man loses his sense of balance and often does fall; this centres at the nape of the neck. One would expect a new tree to grow in its place, and this is indeed figured out by the sudden appearance of a god called Grand Bois, or Great Tree, who possesses a servitor at the very moment when the novice is being identified both with a tree and with a snake. The new tree is thus the new posture expressed by the god who possesses the dissociated man: anatomically, it is the spinal column. In mythology, the snake regularly goes with the tree, and in this particular case it seems to be the image of two distinct physical experiences: the serpentine flexing of the spinal column, which can easily turn into a specifically sexual movement; and, it seems, muscular spasms to do with breathing and swallowing.

If this brief explanation is correct, the question then is how we are to account for the experience of possession itself and for the ritual images which transcribe it. Since ritual obviously has psychological as well as social meaning, a natural place to look for an explanation is in psychoanalysis. Possession cults have been described as though they were institutionalized ways of letting off steam: this, though an over-simplification of the facts, does point us to the key notion of repression. But Freud, though he frequently appealed to the fact of repression in order to explain neurosis, never explained how repression actually works: for him it seems to have been a purely mental and therefore ideal event. It seems possible, however, to see its action as being physical.

One might start by remembering that the standard way of overcoming pain is to learn to endure it—that is, to become hardened to it defensively. This is based on the old axiom that one pain drives out another, and one could find innumerable instances of this principle in the ethnographic literature, showing how bravery, endurance of pain, the undergoing of initiation tests and the acquisition of a conscious awareness of the self are all linked with a conscious repression of infantile and womanish feelings. The expression of this fact in our society can be found in such phrases as 'grit your teeth', 'grin and bear it', 'hold on

to yourself', 'don't be a softie'; while medicine in the past has made much use of the axiom that one pain drives out another by employing nauseous draughts and blistering agents.

If we then take as a guide the James-Lange theory—which says that emotions are grounded in an awareness of physical states, the states being co-existent and co-terminous with the emotions—we could go on to say that when we repress certain emotional experiences from consciousness, we are also repressing the physical sensation associated with them. If one pain drives another out, so one sensation may obliterate another sensation; and indeed it seems that we repress unpleasant sensations, whether they be immediate ones or memories, by hardening ourselves to them, that is, by tensing muscles in the immediate neighbourhood where those sensations are experienced. In this way one creates other, stronger, but more or less neutral sensations, which block the original feeling. Thus, if our eyes hurt from too much light, we frown and narrow the lids as a defence; or, if we experience disturbing or shameful sensations below the belt, we can tense belly or buttock muscles to repress them from consciousness. When such a swamping of emotional sensations by a generalized feeling of muscular tension becomes habitual, we are well on the way to becoming neurotic: caparisoned against the outer world in what Wilhelm Reich, before he became paranoid, called character armour.

If this is so, we can link repression with what seems to be the quite non-Freudian fear of falling, which seems to be universal and comes from standing on two feet and not on four. Those who have interested themselves in posture and postural defects, like Mathias Alexander, not only say that neurosis always goes with bad posture, but that the whole postural and balance mechanism centres on the musculature of the neck. This fact is plain enough if we look at the action of the semi-circular canals in the inner ear, with their reflex pathways to the neck muscles and also, interestingly enough, to the orbital muscles of the eye, which allow one to correct one's balance automatically.

All this suggests that one can read neurotic attitudes as though they were patterns of muscle tension, inextricably combined with the postural mechanism. These centre in the nape of the neck, which is just where dissociation is said to begin in Voodoo and where the soul is ritually set in its place: and the sensations of vertigo, nausea, falling, weight, formication, disarticulation and loss of sight which go with dissociation, not to mention the loss of consciousness attendant on possession, can all be interpreted in the light of this idea. By it, too, we can interpret the varieties of possession. Haitians say that the patron god of a man expresses either his inmost nature or its complementary opposite: that is, either his positive emotions, or the antagonistic attitudes by which he represses them. This is borne out by observation, for a man may be possessed by a number of different gods during one ceremony, some of them energetic and outgoing, others withdrawn; some again fierce and tormented, others minatory and censorious. During possession, it seems, neuroses are dissociated into their positive and negative elements, and either of them can then emerge into physical action.

Finally, Voodoo shows us that the mock deaths and rebirths of initiation rites are physical as well as psychological experiences. The mock death is fully experienced in the numerous unpleasant feelings of dissociation in Voodoo, culminating in a loss of consciousness and amnesia afterwards; while rebirth, which is also symbolized by the novice

emerging from seclusion, his second baptism and taking of a new name, can be as fully experienced in some of the preliminaries to possession, when the hips are thrown into movement as the spine rhythmically flexes. This particular motion is the trademark of the cemetery spirit called Guédé, who has much to do with rebirth ritual; it is also found outside Haiti amongst those who, having taken a hallucinogenic drug, enjoy birth fantasies and imagine that they are giving birth to a child at the same time as they themselves are being born.

Voodoo is a method which encourages dissociation and possession in a temple, where individual and social forces meet. The rituals and the symbolism they employ not only carry the individual towards such states, but are in fact images of them. Some of these symbols are quite cognitive ones, that is, they carry an intellectual meaning; but others are what Piaget called sensori-motor symbols, springing from sources hidden to the rational mind. We seem to be in the presence of a basic manifestation of the mind-body problem: we have rational meanings on the one hand, sensori-motor images on the other. Images in fact seem to be connected with awareness of physical states which cannot be verbally defined; and ritual can be seen as a way of resolving the mind-body dichotomy, by acting out the force of those images which the body proposes to the mind.